Location and Imagination: a Spatial Reading of Eudora Welty's Novels

1. Introduction

(Theme, Rationale and Significance of Study)

In the period immediately following the Second World War the study of space took precedence over the study of time and history. Postmodernism and the spatial turn complemented each other. This can be evidenced in the new outpouring of critical interest in spatial studies seen in works of thinkers like Bertrand Westphal's *'Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces'*, *'The Production of Space'* by Henri Lefebvre, and *'The Poetics of Space'* by Gaston Bachelard. Following on the interest already shown by thinkers like Bakhtin, Jameson and Raymond Williams, in the significance of the time-space interrelation in literary exts, the more recent spatial studies focus on the multiple discourses that emerge from a ocation and a deeper understanding of imaginative space. A spatially sensitive reading of a ext would involve the recognition that representations of space are often transgressive, rossing the boundaries of established norms while also re-establishing new relations among eople, places, and things; and that various agents or groups may be responsible for presenting the geographic spaces at the same time and with different effects. Eudora elty's works reveal a deep involvement and understanding of the space and daily life of ople in the Southern part of America. Her work is very rooted in a Southern milieu, torical, spiritual and cultural; and place is a very important aspect of her art, but through imaginative use of place she transcends the limitations of place. She was regarded for y years by critics and reviewers as a 'regional writer' and the deeper thematic concerns her works dealt with were ignored. More recently there has been a resurgence of interest elty as a writer as well as a photographer. She brings to her work as a writer a keen eye etail and her knowledge of the importance of setting and the moment. Her literary works t be studied without reference to her photography. Her job with the WPA gave her the tunity to travel into the poorest sections of her native State and take snapshots of the who later were inspirations for the characters in her novels and short stories. For e, she once saw a woman ironing in the back stoop of a small rural post office and this he short story 'Why I live at the P.O.'. In her essay "Place in Fiction" she expresses ef that place was an important consideration in fiction stating, "the truth is, fiction for its life on place" (41-42). So, both in her photographic art as well as her literary

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art background and setting give life to her characters and they would react and feel very differently if they populated some other place. She describes it in her essay - "Place in fiction is the named, identified, concrete, exact and exacting, and therefore credible, gathering spot of all that has been felt, is about to be experienced, in the novel's progress. Location pertains to feeling; feeling profoundly pertains to place; place in history partakes of feeling, as feeling about history partakes of place. Every story would be another story, and unrecognizable as art, if it took up its character and plot and happened somewhere else." (42)

For Welty space is the fountainhead of feeling, history and imagination. According to Henri Lefebvre space is a social product. As against the Kantian and Cartesian idea of space as an empty space in which action unfolds, critics like Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre considered space to be of central interest, as created by human interaction. In *The Production of Space* he tries to reconcile mental space with real space. He says there are representations of space, with their abstract and dominant codes and spaces of representation which are imaginatively created. De Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* speaks about the operation of strategies that maintain and reinforce existing social and spatial orders and tactics which involve everyday practices which are creative resistance moves by common people with limited powers. We can see these ideas in operation in the novels of Welty especially in *The Robber Bridegroom* and *Delta Wedding*.

Welty admitted in an interview that she drew inspiration from Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf. In her essay 'The Radiance of Jane Austen' Welty ascribes the timelessness of Austen's art to the fact that it is rooted in a particular time and place. Both writers shared concerns about space and enclosure and art and life and women's place in society. Another major influence on Welty was Virginia Woolf. Many critics such as Patricia Yeager and Suzan Harrison have studied the ways in which both writers disrupt traditional narrative constructions of gender. Welty's narrative strategies echo Woolf's – decentring of narrative authority, using humour, parody, myth to challenge 'masculine' narrative forms like biography and historical narratives, and using time and memory to create a fluid sense of story - telling. In "Place in Fiction," she further clarifies her views on the art of looking and the importance of focusing: "It may be that place can focus the gigantic, voracious eye of genius and bring its gaze to point. Focus then means awareness, discernment, order, clarity, insight—they are the attributes of love. The act of focusing itself has beauty and meaning; it is the act that, continued in, turns into meditation, into poetry. Indeed, as soon as the least of us stands still, that is the moment something extraordinary is seen to be going on in the

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world" (55). This is a very significant aspect in Welty's stories – her characters see- saw between isolation and a sense of belonging, to family, community or place. This self-induced isolation or being an outsider is an act of focusing on the inner self. During an interview Welty once said: "A sheltered life can be a daring life as well. For all serious daring starts from within" (McHaney1). Welty's characters lead lives of interiority, a focus on the inner life that leads to maturity.

Welty's female characters are the producers of space. They inhabit it, are imprisoned in it, recreate it imaginatively and transgress it. According to Westphal a transgression could be an infraction, which means that one does not cross a boundary without departing from the norm. Welty's women occupy a threshold, or a porous border intended to be crossed and by transgressing, they not only cross the porous boundary line but also force the reader to assume that there is a 'will to penetrate' (Westphal 42). By crossing this boundary, they exhibit deviance. In Welty's novels, the women characters go beyond what Deleuze and Guattari call 'the margin of tolerated deviance' or the 'epistrata'. In their *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between 'smooth space' and 'striated space'. Striated space is the space occupied by the state apparatus and smooth space is open to heterogenous and nomadic influences. Welty's women in their attempt to cross beyond the forces that control their lives, reveal imaginative use of mental and physical space.

In *The Optimist's Daughter* Welty's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, Laurel McKelva Hand, though born in Mount Salus is an outsider at her father's funeral as she had left home and made a life for herself in Chicago working as a commercial artist. This novel is complex at several levels – the narrative seems straight forward but it is complicated by characters who remember people and events differently, others tell lies which are revealed during the funeral, gossip about scandalous behaviour is exchanged and as the plot moves forward the reader is led to focus his attention on the act of seeing and remembering. The novel begins with Laurel's father Judge McKelva 'seeing double' which leads to his cataract operation and eventually to his death. Laurel can only see clearly, if she manages to see the past without prejudice and make peace with it. The women in Welty's novels are obsessed with the past or they are the keepers of family and community memory. Family history, community history and even state history is retained by the women who populate these novels, they not only keep it, they creatively reimagine it.

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In her first novel *'Delta Wedding'* Welty imaginatively re-creates a fully functioning plantation home in 1923, when historical movements were already at work to destroy such a society. It is about the lives of women as history is being made, about women looking at men as the men make history. It makes for an unsettling narrative as Welty has appropriated a masculine genre – historical narrative- and feminized it. In this novel and in *The Robber Bridegroom* she challenges the cultural construct of male heroism and machismo by giving voice to war widows, matriarchs who take over after the death of their men. Or, as one of *Delta Wedding*'s female characters recognizes,

"...it was notoriously the women of the Fairchilds who since the Civil War, or—who knew? —since the Indian times, ran the household and had everything at their fingertips—not the men. The women it was who inherited the place—or their brothers, guiltily, handed it over" (234).

The Robber Bridegroom is a critique of the fairy tale It is a modern retelling of the Grimm brothers' story of the same name. The story is underwritten by the history of the Natchez Trace, the brutality of the two narratives: the past Indian history of the Trace and the tale of the cruelly treated heroine Rosamund in the present South are juxtaposed to form a double reading. The world of reality and fantasy, myth, fairy tale and frontier history are re-visioned to give agency to Rosamund.

The Ponder Heart is an oral performance by Edna Earle, narrating the events in the life of the Ponder family for the last eight years especially the shenanigans of her generous uncle Daniel Ponder, who only a week earlier was suspected of murdering his second wife. The audience of one is a complete stranger to the town. So, there is no question of his doubting her tale. Edna is the last of the wealthy Ponders and owner of the Beulah Hotel the only hotel in Clay, Mississippi. Garrulous but kind hearted she oversees her dotty uncle whose only fault is his complete and ingenuous love for everybody and his compulsive generosity. Her narrative style is completely un-textual, peppered with digressions, silences and abrupt change of subject. The reader is so busy listening to her fantastic tale that he forgets that she is revealing the story of her family to a stranger. As he gives away his belongings, she shares her family history.

In *Losing Battles*, the gathered group of relatives all share stories of each other, it is a slow anecdotal revelation of family history with each person revealing a different perspective about all those present. The 'hero' of the clan is Jack Renfro, who escapes from prison to

attend his Grandmother's 90th birthday celebration for which the Beecham-Renfro-Vaughn clan have gathered together at the Vaughn homestead. In this novel Gloria epitomises the Southern woman - daughter, mother, sister, wife, problem solver, living in the lap of a large and loving family. But she has no identity of her own, she knows that she can establish one only if she leaves the cloying love and dependency of the family and their traditions.

Although she famously rejected the label of 'feminist', her works reveal a strong concern with the formation of a female identity and female modes of expression. The women in her works occupy a man's world, recognize the patriarchal ordering and struggle to form their individual identity by transgressing or subverting the male order. Welty's concern is with giving a voice to the voiceless, and in her generation and for one of her upbringing and social milieu, the powerless and the voiceless were women. Although she has been called a Southern realist in that she represents the mindset and lifestyle of the American South, she could not have been unaware of the changed socio-political circumstances. In her novels, therefore, she parodies the South. In *The Optimist's Daughter* Judge McKelva represents the spirit of the South and his death is the end of that era. Similarly, in *Delta Wedding* the self-conscious representation of the plantation lifestyle is made poignant by the writer's awareness of its transience. So, the characters -both men and women, as well as the author herself- are caught between two worlds. The metanarrative of the true, real South is broken up into several contesting narratives by the (mis)remembered oral tales of its citizens. So, this challenge to the idea of unitary place is also a challenge to the fixity of identity. Identity then is a socio-cultural formation and not a biological essential. As keepers of memory and observers of tradition and customs women have been placed in a position opposite to that of men i.e. a position of inferiority. In order to attain self-awareness, they must liberate themselves from this unequal equation. Therefore, they must creatively re-construct space by re-imagining their place in it.

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2. Research problem and hypothesis statement

The study is based on the following hypothesis:

Space, and its related practices have become significant topics of interest in literary and cultural studies recently. Welty's novels have been studied from various perspectives; the psychological, the historical, the gothic, the feminist, the temporal-historical and formalist. Her narrative style is unique. The strategies she uses to subvert patriarchy is also a matter of extensive study.

Welty's works display an enormously deep understanding of space and its effect on her characters' growth and imagination. This has not been focused on yet.

"(Social) space is a (social) product [...] the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action [...] in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power." (Lefebvre 68)

This study intends to explore, analyse and interpret the various strategies used by the women characters in Eudora Welty's novels to recreate, reinvent and also to produce space to free themselves from existing social order thereby wresting some power. The locations that the writer situates her characters' in, the multiple perspectives of them and the effect that the space has on their lives both exterior and interior will be explored.

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3. Aims and objectives of the research

The aim of this research is to investigate, analyse and interpret the novels of Eudora Welty through a spatial approach.

The portrayal of Southern women in fiction has veered between extremes, the chaste woman in the Southern Romantic tradition whose 'quest' is for a husband or the rebel whose transgressions of social rules ends in death and/or madness. Welty's women, in comparison, though living in a patriarchal order, are constantly trying to escape or disturb that order through their imaginative use of space.

Although this study aims to look at Welty's novels only, her life, her work as a photographer, her short fiction and her collection of essays and reviews will be referenced to get a full understanding of Welty's art. Her entire oeuvre can be studied as a chronicle of her own growth as an artist.

The **objectives** are as follows:

To use spatial theories to analyse and interpret her novels

To study the polytopic nature of the space described in Welty's novels

To explore the ways in which location is used in her works

To analyse the means by which the female characters use space to subvert the accepted social order in the South

To study the effect of transgression on the lives of women characters

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4. Operational terms and concepts

Some of the terms that will be used in this study are – southern, space, imagination, location, transgression, patriarchy, subject, history, memory, region, truth, reality, social construction, subversion, family, community, madness, enclosure and escape.

Some operational words and the sense in which they will be used in this study:

Smooth space: heterogenous and nomadic space

Striated space: policed space

Threshold: boundary between will and action

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5. Review of literature

Eudora Welty's is a significant voice in 20th century American literature. She has authored 5 novels – *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942), *Delta Wedding* (1946), *The Ponder Heart* (1954), *Losing Battles* (1970) and *The Optimist's Daughter* (1972) for which she received the Pulitzer Prize. She has also written 4 popular and critically acclaimed collections of short stories – *A Curtain of Green* (1941), *The Wide Net* (1943), *The Bride of Innisfallen* (1955) and her most metaphoric collection *The Golden Apples* (1949). Her own book of essays *One Writer's Beginnings* (1971) details her growth as an artist, her inner vision and the influences on her work. *The Eye of the Story* (1983) essays and reviews reveal her affection for other writers and her ability to critically and objectively analyse their work. She has published two books of photographs *One Time, One Place: Mississippi in the Depression* and *Country Churchyards*. The sheer variety of her work reveals the artistic brilliance and active curiosity of the artist's growth towards maturity and acceptance.

The theoretical study of Welty's works will be explored on the basis of Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space,* Bertrand Westphal's *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces, Spatiality* by Robrt Tally Jr., *The Production of Space* by Henri Lefebvre, De Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life,* and Edward Soja's *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory.*

Many research papers have been written on the social and cultural attitudes in the South and these will also have a bearing on the current study. 'The Southern Gentleman and the Idea of Masculinity: Figures and Aspects of the Southern Beau in the Literary Tradition of the American South' by Emmeline Gros, The Dragon's Blood: Feminist Intertextuality in Eudora Welty's 'The Golden Apples' by Rebecca Mark, Spatialization: A Strategy for Reading Narrative by Susan Stanford Friedman, The Myth of the Heroine: the Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century by Esther Labovitz, Gender and History in Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding.* And books such as Rose Gillian's *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge,* Doreen Massey's Space, *Place, and Gender,* Liz Bondi and Joyce

Davidson's *Situating gender, and Lise* Nelson and Joni Seager's , Joni collection of essays *A companion to Feminist Geography.*

Ruth M Vande Kieft's Eudora *Welty* is regarded as a definitive study of Welty, Michael Kreyling's *Eudora Welty's Achievements of Order* and Alfred J Appel's *A Season of Dreams,* Patricia Yaeger's *Because a Fire was in my Head: Eudora Welty and the Dialogic Imagination,* are some research works on Welty. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Mary Ellman's Thinking About Women, Rita Felski's *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, Julia Kristaeva's *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art,* Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics,* Elaine Showalter's *A literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing*, Patricia Mayer Spacks' *The Female Imagination: A literary and Psychological Investigation of Women's Writing,* Mieke Bal's *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method,* Susan S. Lanser's "Toward a Feminist Narratology," Robyn. R. Warhol & Diane P. Herndl (eds.). *Feminisms. An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, Gerald Prince's "Narratology"and Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* are some of the works that will be referred to during this study.

6. Research Design

There will be an interpretative analysis of the novels of Eudora Welty. The works will be studied from the spatial perspective to understand the effects she produces.

This study will consider the following novels by Eudora Welty -

The Robber Bridegroom (1942),

Delta Wedding (1946),

The Ponder Heart (1954),

Losing Battles (1970) and

The Optimist's Daughter (1972)

However, there will be references to her collections of short stories and her books of essays as well as her photographic collections wherever pertinent. They are -

A Curtain of Green (1941),

The Wide Net (1943),

The Bride of Innisfallen (1955)

The Golden Apples (1949).

Her own book of essays:

One Writer's Beginnings (1971)

The Eye of the Story (1983)

Books of photographs:

One Time, One Place: Mississippi in the Depression (1971) and

Country Churchyards (2000)

7. Scope and Limitations of the study

The scope of this study is elaborate yet focused as it will conduct an in-depth analysis of Eudora Welty's novel using current spatial theories. Using the works of thinkers like Gaston Bachelard, Bertrand Westphal, Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre, Welty's novels will be studied for the ways in which her female characters use their location, space- interior and exterior, to imaginatively recreate a mobile milieu for themselves. An in-depth study of Eudora Welty's novels from a spatial perspective has not been undertaken yet. Therefore, this is a new area of study and will add to the existing body of knowledge about space in literature.

In her novels Welty has presented the perspective of privileged upper middle class white women and therefore, this limits the scope of the study. Her short stories will be referred to as they have artistic vision and her maturity as an artist can be estimated by the growing depth and complexity of her stories.

8. Tentative scheme of chapters

Chapter 1 – Introduction

An introduction to Eudora Welty, her life and her literary, critical and photographic output will be provided and the major theories and significant terms which will be used to study Welty's novels in a spatial context will also be explicated.

Chapter 2 – Re-evaluating history through rethinking geographical spaces

Welty's works reveal a multifocal approach to space. Various spaces which were considered as male preserves of history- making are laid open to an alternative reading. To do this she sometimes uses myths and a more visual approach to describing spaces. This chapter will look at how history can be destabilized by re -thinking geography.

Chapter 3- The South as real space and imaginary space

The Southern traditions place immense pressure on women to maintain them. Many a times the practices of everyday life, as de Certeau calls it, is the only way to reclaim power for the women who operate in patriarchal spaces. This chapter will explore the various ways in which spatial control operates in real life and the imaginative transgressions that empower women.

Chapter 4- Comprehension of space and self-awareness

Memory and dreams play a significant role in re-thinking space. This chapter will study the significance of 'inside' space – both physical and of the imagination- in order to reveal the growth of the individual from isolation to self-awareness through their understanding of the spaces they inhabit and the role of memory in this.

Chapter 5 - Conclusion

This chapter will be a delineation of the findings of the study. The main hypothesis of the study will be revisited to find out how far it has been validated by the research undertaken.

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9. Comparative Study

Comparative study is not the focus of this research, but comparative analysis will be undertaken in a limited way wherever relevant to the research.

10. Justification of the study

Eudora Welty has a very different vision of humanity from her fellow writers from the South. She is overshadowed by Faulkner and very often clubbed with women writers of the South like Catherine Anne Porter, Carson McCullers and Flannery O Connor. In her work she defied all kinds of labelling. As a woman writer her work exhibits an empathy for women's issues which she has handled subtly. She disavows any political or activist agenda. In her art one sees the growth of the woman as artist and the sense of family and community that provides a sense succour to women. Isolation leads to contemplation for the characters in her novels and this interiority leads to a sense of self. Though her characters are lonely they are never atomistic. Her narrative strategies are highly subversive: plot, character, and narration defy the readers' expectations.

Along with time, space is a very important area of study. Not only the period in which texts are produced but also the literary, geographical and interior space they recreate are very important areas of study today. The spaces that the writer inhabits as well as the characters actions within the space they inhabit can reveal social, cultural and political changes in society. A spatial analysis of Eudora Welty's novels has not been attempted yet.

This study will contribute to the store of work done on this wonderful writer.

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All the novels named below are written by Eudora Welty

1. *The Robber Bridegroom (1942)*
2. *Delta Wedding (1946),*
3. *The Golden Apples (1949)*
4. *The Ponder Heart (1954)*
5. *Losing Battles (1970)*
6. *The Optimist's Daughter (1972)*
7. *One Writer's Beginnings* (1971) (a book of essays)